

TESTIMONY OF RITA STEVENS
ALASKA FEDERATION OF NATIVES, HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

ALASKA NATIVE ISSUES HEARING

BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, my name is Rita Stevens, and I am a member of the Alaska Federation of Natives Human Resources Committee. I am also President and CEO for the Kodiak Island Native Association. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to be here before you today to testify on Alaska Native issues that we hope will be addressed in this 107th Congress. I will be addressing Family Resource Centers, the Reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, Contract Support Costs, and the need for improved access to advanced telecommunications services.

Family Resource Centers

The Alaska Federation of Natives Human Resources Committee requests that Congress enact legislation establishing a "Five-year Family Resource Demonstration Project" in rural regions of Alaska. Families in rural Alaska face many difficult challenges. Incidents of child abuse, neglect, drug abuse and domestic violence are common in rural Alaska. Rural Alaska suffers from high rates of criminal behavior, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Effect, teen pregnancy, alcohol related deaths, and suicide. We need family resource centers in the rural areas to attempt to address these issues in a manner that deals with the "whole person", thereby meeting all individual needs.

There are currently some resources available to address these needs, but most of these support programs and services are not easily accessible to Alaska's rural communities, making it difficult and costly to benefit from them, or there are too many separate programs attempting to provide similar services. The Human Resources Committee believes that more must be done to provide resources that are easily accessible to Alaska's rural families. Moreover, we need a way to better coordinate our delivery system in a way that integrates services and reduces administrative redundancies. The AFN Implementation Study recommends the establishment of a major demonstration program in Alaska to provide Family Resource Centers. These Centers would provide a focal point for all programs for children and families, including: Adult Basic Education, Before and After School Outreach, Child Care, Head Start, Healthy Families, Employment and Training, General Assistance, Domestic Violence Response, and Alcohol and Drug Prevention. Consolidating programs and services in Family Resource Centers in each village would ensure that rural families have access to the kinds of support programs and services available to urban families.

The Human Resource Committee recommends a five year Demonstration Project that would: establish block grant funding for the consolidation of programs and services for children and families;

provide participation grants to encourage integration of governmental services; and allow for development of integrated programs in rural communities. We further recommend that the Demonstration Projects be conducted with the most directly affected Native Regional Non- Profits with experience in social service programs.

Indian Health Care Improvement Act Reauthorization

The AFN Human Resources Committee also supports the reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, as provided for in Senate bill 212. The Indian Health Care Improvement Act was enacted in 1976 and is now due for reauthorization to continue to the federal provision of health care services to Native people. Since its enactment, the Act has reduced serious illness and resulted in a healthier Native community, but there remains a need for these services, as the health status of Native people is still very poor in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups. The unmet health needs are staggering. When compared to the rest of the American population, Native people suffer from a death rate that is 627 percent higher from alcoholism; 533 percent higher from tuberculosis; and 249 percent higher from diabetes. Congress needs to look at the strides that have been made with the Act and build upon those so that we can have a healthier Native population.

AFN also supports the core principle of "self-determination" embodied in the Act. By allowing tribes, tribal organizations, and Alaska Native health organizations to contract or compact for the operation of Indian Health Service (IHS) clinics and hospitals, the Act allows Native people to participate in the planning and management of health services and to take control of their own future. The reauthorization bill will reaffirm Indian self-determination and the promote healthier Native communities.

It is also important to note that the reauthorization bill was drafted with the input of tribes, tribal organizations, urban Indian organizations and health care providers. A National Steering Committee was established to receive tribal input and to draft bill language. Many Alaska Native health organizations were involved. Based on the input received, the Steering Committee and IHS reviewed existing law and proposed changes to improve the provision of services by allowing more flexibility and choice and by making IHS more responsive to the health needs of Native people. The bill addresses important components of Indian health care, including access to, and care for, diabetes, prenatal care, alcohol and substance abuse, mental health, and coronary care. AFN urges Congress to pass the reauthorization bill to further improve the health status of Native people.

Contract Support Cost Shortfalls

With regard to contract support costs, AFN calls upon Congress to enact legislation to make contract support funding a guarantee, so that tribal organization at the forefront of self- determination and self-governance compacting are not penalized for their efforts. Alaska's Regional Non-Profit health and social service providers continue to suffer from contract support cost funding shortfalls. As you know, we have only a fixed amount of IHS and BIA funding to carry out our significantly under-funded health and social service programs. The result of the contract support cost shortfall is a dollar-for-

dollar further reduction in the funding that would otherwise provide desperately needed health and social services to Alaska's Native people. Therefore, we recommend that the Senate introduce legislation modeled after last year's House bill, H.R. 4148.

Access to Telecommunications Services

The AFN Human Resources Committee also requests the Congress ensure Alaska Native service providers and rural villages have affordable access to advanced telecommunications services. Alaska Native Regional Non-Profit Corporations are trying to deliver educational and social services to tribal members in rural Alaska, but telecommunication services required to do this cost 10 times more than those in urban Alaska. There is increasing need for up-to-date technology to allow the Regional Non-Profits to deliver vocational education, adult literacy, social services, economic development, and other services to rural Alaska villages. The Universal Service programs have significantly narrowed the "digital divide" in many places around the country, but at the same time have not served all members of rural Alaskan communities. Schools, libraries and health clinics are able to access the Internet at reasonable rates, but community members and businesses cannot. Further, in regions where the Regional Non-Profit Health Corporation (funded by IHS) is separate from the Regional Non-Profit (funded by BIA), which provides educational and social services, only the Health Corporation is eligible for improved internet access. This prevents the distribution of core educational and social service programs.

The cost of providing advanced telecommunications services in Alaska will remain high because these services must be provided via satellite, but these services are needed to revolutionize the way Alaska's Non-Profits deliver social and educational services. Therefore, the AFN Human Resources Committee urges Congress to modify the existing Universal Service programs to allow Alaska's Non-Profit Regional Corporations to more efficiently provide services to rural Alaska, and to provide reasonably priced Internet access to village residents.

We recommend one of the following steps: 1) an amendment to Section 254(h)(1)(A) of the Telecommunications Act to clearly identify Alaska Non-Profits as eligible entities for Universal Service support; 2) direct the FCC or the Joint Federal-State Board to provide Alaska Native Regional Non-Profits with Universal Service support equal to that provided to rural health providers, as called for in Section 254(b)(7) of the Telecommunications Act; or 3) amend the Telecommunications Act so that schools, health care providers, or other eligible entities in rural Alaska villages become Internet Service Providers on a not-for profit basis, at Universal Service rates.

Mr. Chairman, I want to express my appreciation for the opportunity to testify on these important issues faced by Alaska's Native people. Thank you.